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Parental Alienation Syndrome

A severe emotional and psychological disorder in children brought on by highly contested custody battles in our Family Court System.

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is best defined by the well known child psychologist, Dr. Richard Gardner, as "a disturbance in which children are obsessively preoccupied with deprecation and/or criticism of a parent, denigration that is unjustified and/or exaggerated." Children of PAS show negative parental reactions and perceptions which can be grossly exaggerated and entirely lack any ambivalence. Put simply, they profess rejection and hatred of a previously loved parent, most often in the context of divorce and child custody conflicts.

Parental alienation has become an increasingly common element in the "battlefield" of divorce and custody litigation. In the 60's, the accusation most often used between embittered spouses was infidelity; in the 70's, homosexuality; in the 80's we saw allegations of sexual abuse used to "eliminate" the other parent entirely, a situation which has become epidemic in the 90's.

Special Update

In January 1999, a companion volume to the DSM-IV is scheduled to be published. Whereas DSM-IV deals with diagnostic categories, the new volume will deal with specific treatment modalities, much more specific than those to be found in the Procedure Terminology Manual (PTM). The new volume will be called Treatment Statistical Manual of Behavioral and Mental Disorders-I(TSM-I) and is being published under the auspices of the Joint Commission for TSM-BMD. The editors have invited [Dr. Richard Gardner](#) to write four treatment protocols, one of which will be on the treatment of the parental alienation syndrome. Such an entry provides compelling evidence for professional recognition of the syndrome.



It has been
2601 DAYS
since
Bill Kirkendale
has seen his daughter
Lee-Ann
because of
Parental
Alienation
Syndrome.

Now the final frontier has been reached. In PAS, children's psyches are manipulated to make them hate and reject a person they need and love, their mother or their father.

Parental alienation is a form of psychological kidnapping which has a devastatingly destructive effect on a parent-child relationship.

Frequently PAS is found in cases of allegations of physical or sexual abuse and is a major factor in child abduction.

"The most important factor which produces Parental Alienation Syndrome in a child is fear; fear, not of the parent for whom the child professes hatred, but fear of the so-called 'loved' parent, the 'hostage taker.'"

The psychological process of alienation resembles that observed in hostage-takings, where the captive identifies with the aggressor to the point of rejecting all outside influences—the "Stockholm Syndrome," best known in North America in the Patty Hearst case. Cult control methods also produce a similar pathology.

The process of alienation is complex, but the symptoms are remarkably easy to distinguish, although each case has its own particular psychological and legal dynamics. One factor is common to all, however, and that is the destructive effects on both child and parent.

Because of more egalitarian family laws, custody is no longer the presumed right of one parent, (usually the mother) resulting in a huge increase in custody litigation. Although our laws are designed to protect children's rights and best interests, the opposite is happening more and more. Parental Alienation is being used to distort our family court system's role and duty to protect both children and parents.

Actually the legal process, with its concomitant evaluations, interventions and delays, may aggravate the pathology, or even create it, the so-called "Iatrogenic Phenomenon."

REINTEGRATION

While the courts tend to hand down judgments favorable to the "hated" parent, the latter is often powerless to implement these because of (a) the alienating parent's sabotage, (b) the children's extreme hostility and disregard for any form of authority (another classic symptom of PAS), and (c) the draconian measures that have to be taken to implement any court ruled measures. Successful reintegration is rarely addressed by our legal system and social services.

After a judgment is rendered, the parent is left alone to pick up the pieces of a shattered bond, often dealing with

hostile or severely disturbed children.

WHO ALIENATES MORE, FATHERS OR MOTHERS?

Contrary to information from some other sources, our files show a fairly even balance of fathers and mothers who act as "alienators."

Fathers may alienate children from their mother for vengeance or control, or to retain the family residence, or to avoid paying child support. It is seen in various degrees of severity in 90% of cases of conjugal violence. Conversely, women are profoundly threatened by the possible loss of custody of their children, and may go to any lengths to keep them, in both a psychological and biological reaction. Women may be motivated by vengeance or financial issues as well.

Parental Alienation Syndrome, whether induced by a mother or father, produces the same symptoms in a child, but early results of clinical research show important differences in the factors which motivate men and women to alienate their children.

The long-term effects of PAS on a child are extremely serious. Research is currently fragmented among psychiatric institutions and individual specialists. Information tends to support the prognosis that PAS, if not overcome before adolescence, usually becomes permanent.

The effects of parental alienation include long-term depression, inability to function in a normal psycho-social framework, ego and identity dysfunction, despair, uncontrollable guilt, isolation, hostility, disorganization, personality "splitting" and even suicide. Research also shows that adult children of alienation are prone to alcoholism, drug abuse and other symptoms of internal distress. The effects on the rejected parent are equally devastating and permanent if the parent-child bond remains broken, and should be given due attention in our legal and social systems.

TREATMENT OF PAS

Methods are still experimental and professional opinions often vary. Study of the most severe cases shows that successful reintegration can be achieved only by complete separation from the alienating parent, and this for a substantial period (minimum of six months to as much as two years). In many cases recently, re-integration was successfully achieved in severe cases through "implosion" or "immersion" therapy and complete separation from the alienating parent indefinitely. Moderate and mild cases may not require such drastic measures. Much depends on the age of the child, whether pre-adolescent, adolescent or adult, the factor which determines what legal or therapeutic steps can be undertaken.

STRUCTURED REHABILITATION

There is a very urgent need for structured rehabilitation, not normally provided by social services of psychiatric institutions. A parent who succeeds in regaining custody of a hostile, alienated child needs practical and professional support, particularly during the preliminary re-integration period. Traditional therapy is useless in severe cases. What is needed is a 24-hour supervised nurturing environment, supportive to both parent and child and meeting BOTH their needs.

HOW TO SPOT CASES OF SEVERE PAS

The very first thing to look for in severe cases of PAS is irrational behavior in a child who for no good or properly explained reasons, tells you they want nothing further to do with one of their parents. This is the number one tip-off that this child is in severe emotional trouble and is definitely suffering from a well advanced case of extreme PAS.

The second most easily identifiable symptom of PAS is when a child shows no ambivalence whatsoever toward their parents, stating that one parent is all good and the other parent is all bad. This portends something we all know is not right with the child because a lack of ambivalence is unnatural behavior in human beings. No one of any basic intelligence, maturity or emotional stability can support the notion that one thing or one person is all good and the other all bad – we all must have ambivalent feelings or else we couldn't survive in this world.

And, finally, the third most easily recognized symptom of severe PAS is when the child also displays their unjustified and open hostility, anger and hatred to all of the other members of the so-called "hated" parent's extended family, also for no good or properly explained reasons. It's as if both the so-called "hated" parent and their entire extended family were made completely non-existent and rendered totally unimportant in the syndrome induced child's life. Grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, nieces all seem to suddenly disappear from the child's life never to be heard from, spoken to or seen again.

The key to all of this totally unnatural and extreme behavior is this. When such a child who is suffering from a severe case of PAS cannot and will not provide you with a good and plausible and logically intelligent reason why they are behaving in this fashion, then you will know exactly what is going on. A trained psychologist doesn't have to tell you – plain, good old-fashioned common sense and logic will tell you that you have a severely emotionally disturbed child on your hands who needs help.

Child abuse, which PAS children are definitely victims of, is a very serious matter. Adult victims of child abuse, later on in life, will tell you that they were very good at hiding their abuse, both from others and from themselves. They were able to put on a happy face and put up a good front on the outside, while they died a thousand deaths of extreme anxiety, guilt, emotional turmoil and fear on the inside. It is important, then, that you not allow yourself to be fooled by a child suffering from severe PAS who will tell you everything is just wonderful and happy in their life, but you know

from the symptoms I just described that this is just flat out not true. If you should ever encounter such a child, I would urge you to call us for more information and do everything in your power to direct them to some very skilled and professional counseling. You very well might just be saving their life by doing so.

HOW CAN WE AT THE FAMILY COURT REFORM COUNCIL HELP?

We offer the following services:

- ◆ Emergency counseling (by phone and/or personal consultation)
- ◆ Crisis intervention
- ◆ Workshops (full and half-day)
- ◆ A program for the promotion of public awareness of PAS
- ◆ Regular updates to bibliography, professional referral list and information
- ◆ Development of educational programs for schools, churches, and universities
- ◆ Individual case referral and consultations for legal services
- ◆ Exchange of information and resources with other organizations



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For more information on Parental Alienation Syndrome please contact:

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